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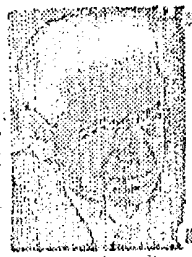

Spy Story

MAX LERNER

The case of the two Sokolovs, the Soviet spies whose trial the Justice Department has decided to abandon, seems to turn on last-minute reluctance in Washington to reveal over-much about how and by whom the case was cracked. This is especially true about Karlo Tuomi, a former high Soviet intelligence officer and the kind of double agent whose exploits on the printed page always delight me.

This is a belated love-letter to a woman whose books have for years given me considerable pleasure—Helen MacInnes. I meant to write it after her first book, "Above Suspicion," and several times after her more recent ones. Now that I have read "The Venetian Affair" my homage has become a must.

Women writers account for a large segment of ordinary whodunits which use intrigue, poison and sleuths, but they write strangely few of the political whodunits. Can it be that politics has been a man's art, from Aristotle and Machiavelli to now, and that this specialization carries over even into the fantasy world of suspense, death and detection? But the demand for the political "suspense story" has brought some of the most resourceful minds of our writing generation forward to satisfy it—Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming—and it would have been surprising if no woman at all had appeared in this grand company.

Helen MacInnes is among them. She has in high measure the sense of place (as in "North From Rome," "Decision at Delphi"), and she displays it to the full in her current book which will evoke nostalgia in anyone who has experienced the streets of Paris and the network of canals in Venice. And more than any of the male writers in this suspense genre she has the gift of telling a love story delicately, not overplaying it.

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But the heart of this book's quality lies not so much in the love story or in the ingenuity of the plotting (which is standard) or in the handling of suspense (which is well done by many writers). It is in the treatment of the theme of political war. Actually there is no way of writing these political suspense stories involving espionage unless you take as a basic premise the existence of a Grand Design for world power on the part of the Communists. In one way or another all the suspense writers assume that the Russians don't want a nuclear war and will do everything to avoid it, but they also assume that the Russians have not given up their drive toward world power; the difference being that they are now using their spies to make trouble everywhere for America and the West by political means, and that they hope to win world power by spreading division, confusion and chaos in the Western camp by every weapon short of large-scale war.

Aside from their technical writing skills the difference between the suspense story novelists lies in how seriously they take this political intent of the enemy camp and how believable they make the political intrigue. Helen MacInnes scores on both counts. She is the sworn enemy of political innocence. The intellectual strength of her book will be found in her scorn for this innocence. Her plot deals with a parallel to the historic episode in which someone managed to pin on America the charge of a nasty CIA plot to help the Algerian OAS overthrow the de Gaulle regime. The author pushes this idea of a fake plot a bit further and comes up with a Communist plan to frame the Americans and British for the assassination of a towering chief of state. What she makes credible is how the Communist apparatus for political warfare would go at this and how the CIA—aided by three or four non-professional volunteers— frustrate it.

To read it is sheer delight, from the opening scene in a New York dentist's office followed by a tense mixup at Orly Airport, to the final rip-roaring resolution on the roof and in the attic of a Venetian *palazzo*.

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But I would plead also that this is good political science as well as blood-and-thunder suspense. I warn you, however, that both the ritual conservative and the ritual liberal won't like the book's politics. The conservative won't like it because he believes the showdown between the two world power systems has to be one of naked power in the end. Helen MacInnes, on the contrary, shows that while the Russians are not averse to the political murder of persons who stand in their way, and even mass-murder in staged riots, they rely in the end not on naked power but on the power of ideas. They use their intrigue to manipulate ideas.

This suggests why the ritual liberal won't like the politics of this book either. For the liberal assumes that ideas lose or win on their own on the stage of history, whereas the fact is that they are often given a decisive push or twist behind the scenes by men who don't care a hoot about their validity or truth but know how to fix them for their own purposes. The Communists count on "neutralist leaders" who are hoodwinked fools, on "progressive" French and British newspapers, on riots which seem the spontaneous expression of anti-West revolts but are carefully engineered to create that effect. The author has even portrayed two CIA men sympathetically. Since she wrote her book after the Bay of Pigs fiasco this took some doing. The CIA men in this book are neither fools nor reactionaries but intelligent and resourceful men who recognize ideas and can handle themselves well in discussion as well as in shooting.

I don't claim that this view of Miss MacInnes' is the only possible view of how history works, or even the best one. But after Graham Greene's sniping at everything American and Ian Fleming's cynical disdain for political ideas—even when he uses them as foils for his plot—I welcome her emphasis.